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Mitigating policy-to-practice disparities in inclusive education from a bioecological systems perspective: The case of selected secondary schools in the Lower Shire, Malawi

Ben de Souza 

Department of Secondary and Post-School Education, Rhodes University, Makhanda, South Africa
souzaben@outlook.com

In this study I used a qualitative phenomenological research design to investigate strategies to mitigate policy-practice mismatches and enhance inclusive education in Malawi. Previous research studies revealed policy-to-practice disparities in Malawian inclusive education. However, the studies fell short in proffering strategies to mitigate the disparities and enhance inclusive education. I argue that effective strategies that could lessen policy-to-practice mismatches and advance inclusive education primarily rest with mainstream teachers, as they mediate policy and practice. I draw on Urie Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems perspective to form theoretical and analytical frameworks for understanding the problem and discussing the findings. Sixteen in-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted with purposely selected teachers from 4 mainstream secondary schools in the Lower Shire, Malawi. I found that some mainstream teachers resist inclusive education and would like learners with disabilities to return to special schools, thus refuting policy directives. As a way forward, I recommend that future policy formulation and implementation in Malawian mainstream education should consider a bioecological systems approach through which policymakers interact with mainstream teachers to improve their perspectives and practices regarding inclusive education. The recommendations made may inform fundamental discourses for inclusive education in primary and secondary schools in Malawi and beyond.

Keywords: bioecological systems perspective; inclusive education; mainstream teachers; Malawi; policy-to-practice disparities

Introduction

The premise of the study reported on here was that a mismatch existed between inclusive education policies and teachers' practices in four selected mainstream secondary schools in the Lower Shire, Malawi. Policy-to-practice disparity in education is a mismatch between what policy stipulates and what stakeholders practise (De Souza, 2020). The mismatch could be between what inclusive education policy requires mainstream teachers to do and what the teachers actually do (Kamchedzera, 2010). Policies and strategies may stipulate that classroom practices should recognise the diverse needs of all learners. When a teacher does not conform to the dictates of a diverse class, it may entail a disparity between policy or strategy and practice.

Hence, there is a need for inclusive strategies to mitigate the mismatches and enhance inclusivity. Inclusive strategies are the means that teachers develop to provide learners with disabilities the same learning opportunities as their peers. These inclusive strategies may involve initiatives for the teachers to engage and include all learners with all distinctions of disabilities. For instance, including a video or an audio clip in an inclusive class with visual or hearing impaired learners would require further thought or adaptations. Consequently, with this study I intended to answer the following main question: What strategies can mitigate policy-to-practice disparities and enhance inclusive education in the selected secondary schools in the Lower Shire, Malawi? I specifically intended to answer the following questions: What problems arise in inclusive education policy and practice? How can inclusive education policy development be reframed? How can the implementation of inclusive education practice be enhanced?

This article is structured in five main sections. The first section contains a literature review that provides background to inclusive education's legislative and policy context globally and in Malawi. In the theoretical section I explain and justify the applicability of Urie Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems perspective in inclusive education research and practice. The third section provides details about the methodological approach, the data collection procedures (e.g., recruitment of participants, informed consent, duration and location of interviews and recording), and the data analysis procedures. The findings are presented with an explanation of the analysis in the fourth section. The fifth and last section is a discussion of the results using Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems theoretical framework to highlight some critical areas for potential intervention to address policy-to-practice disparities in inclusive education in Malawi with recommendations relevant to primary and secondary schools in the southern African context.

Literature Review

Policy development for inclusive education in Malawi

Globally, policies and strategies have been introduced to accelerate efforts to educate all learners in mainstream schools regardless of their disabilities (Hajisoteriou & Sorkos, 2023). Countries, including Malawi, pledged to commit to the declarations articulated in these policy statements. Most education systems in Africa developed inclusive education policies and strategies, thinking it would successfully eliminate exclusion within mainstream education (De Souza, 2021; Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020). Policymakers overlooked the need to engage

mainstream teachers to understand the reasons for moving learners with disabilities from special schools to inclusive schools (Adewumi & Mosito, 2019).

Malawi has no standalone policy on inclusive education (but efforts are underway to change this situation and soon the first national policy on inclusive education may be released). The country draws on several general education policy frameworks and inclusive education strategies to guide the implementation of inclusive education (De Souza, 2020). In this regard, Malawi draws on the National Education Policy (Malawi Ministry of Education [MoE], 2016), the National Strategy on Inclusive Education (Malawi Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2017) and the National Educator Sector Investment Plan (Malawi MoE, 2020), among other frameworks. The key stipulation in all these frameworks is that inclusive education is one of the government's strategies for achieving the Education for All agenda. Still, these frameworks also stipulate that having a fully-fledged inclusive education system in Malawi is impossible. Instead, a twin-track system is preferred whereby some learners with disabilities would remain in special schools while the mainstream system figures out inclusive education.

The stipulations in the policies and strategies often differ from what generally happens in mainstream schooling practices (De Souza, 2020). This dire situation contradicts a supposed ideal situation that inclusive schools should fulfil the educational aspirations of all learners regardless of excluding factors such as disabilities. In a way, the policy-to-practice disparities have to do with mainstream teachers' classroom practices. Still, the disparities may not necessarily arise from the mainstream teachers' knowledge. Instead, the disparities may have to do with how the teachers are involved in inclusive education policies and strategies to prepare themselves for inclusive classes.

In the Malawian context, research studies (such as Banks, Hunt, Kalua, Nindi, Zuurmond & Shakespeare, 2022; Chimwaza, 2015; Kamchedzera, 2010) show that policy-to-practice mismatches undermine the successful implementation of inclusive education. Kamchedzera (2010) argues that the challenges that arise in the implementation of inclusive education in Malawi do not necessarily originate from learners (with or without disabilities) or teachers (specialist or mainstream) but from poorly developed policies. If policymakers develop a poorly worded policy, the logical expectation is that the intended stakeholders would have a poor understanding thereof; a situation that Chimwaza (2015) confirms. The critical issue highlighted in Kamchedzera's research is that Malawi's policies and strategies for inclusive education are

formulated based on contradictory sources. Like Kamchedzera (2010), other studies assert that the efficiency of inclusive education in Malawi is driven by unnecessary curiosity in implementing precepts of special schools in an inclusivity context (De Souza, 2020; Hummel, 2018; Price, 2018).

Practice implementation for inclusive education in Malawi

Malawi has irrefutably registered an incredible improvement in inclusive education, evident in the formulation of policies and the incorporation of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools across the country (Hayes & Bulat, 2017; Kamchedzera, 2015; MacDonnell Chilemba, 2013). The logical expectation is that policy frameworks would give direction to inclusive practices in mainstream schools. However, most of the enacted national inclusive education policies and strategies seldom consider inclusive educational needs of schools and learners in primary and secondary schools.

The first example would be the inclusion of learners with physical disabilities in the Malawian education systems. The mainstream schools were originally built without regard for the needs of learners with physical disabilities (Hayes & Bulat, 2017). The policy frameworks, such as the National Strategy on Inclusive Education (Malawi Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2017), mandate the mainstream education system to ensure that such learners are included. Still, the same frameworks lack practical strategies to transform the mainstream systems towards inclusivity. These problems are evident in the lack of physical renovations in the school infrastructure to accommodate learners with physical disabilities (Kamchedzera, 2015).

Learners with sensory impairments, intellectual disabilities, visual impairments, hearing difficulties and autism all need specialised support for meaningful inclusion in mainstream education (Phiri, 2021). Including such learners would require mainstream teachers to develop inclusive pedagogical proficiency to cater for the differing abilities (Phiri, 2021). Again, the inclusion of such learners would require the policy frameworks to redefine and relocate the roles of specialist teachers from special schools to mainstream education. Nonetheless, the policy frameworks are not explicit in this regard. For instance, the National Strategy on Inclusive Education (Malawi Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2017) defines the roles of specialist teachers but these are exclusively applicable to special schools. This situation leaves the mainstreaming agenda meaningless because the learners are inclusively excluded due to a lack of tailored and specialised support within the mainstream settings.

The issue of albinism in Malawi is an example. Since 2010, Malawi has witnessed a rise in the killing of persons with albinism. The killings are due to the profoundly entrenched myths associated with albinism in some parts of Africa, such as that their body parts bring financial fortunes (Taylor, Bradbury-Jones & Lund, 2019). The practice of abducting and killing persons with albinism in Malawi became rampant, following reports from across borders in Tanzania and Mozambique that traditional doctors were using their body parts for charms (Lynch, Lund & Massah, 2014). Because of the escalation in the abduction and killing of persons with albinism and society's negative attitudes towards them, their inclusion in mainstream education settings is at stake. This is unfortunate since learners with albinism usually have disabilities, such as visual impairments. National policies and strategies can foster opportunities that inclusive education could offer to include learners with albinism (De Souza, 2022a). Unfortunately, the policies and strategies that have been formulated since 2010, such as the National Education Policy (Malawi MoE, 2016) and the National Strategy on Inclusive Education (Malawi Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2017), disregard the need for responsiveness. This state of affairs suggests that policy ideals and inclusive needs do not tally.

Thus, it is high time to reflect on whether inclusive education contributes to positive attitudes towards learners with disabilities (Wånggren, Remnant, Huque, Kachali, Sang & Ngwira, 2023). Such a reflection departs from a policy point of view with some theoretical grounding. This quest

could be achieved by setting the difference between the dual system of education that involved special education and mainstream education. Consequently, this difference will help us to understand that all education should be inclusive and that inclusive education is a process of including learners with barriers to learning (De Souza, 2023). This process makes the system inclusive of all learners and, therefore, requires mainstream teachers who adopt and implement an inclusive pedagogy within an inclusive education system.

Theoretical Framework

Urie Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bioecological systems perspective (BSP) formed the theoretical framework for the study. The BSP originated in Lev Vygotsky's work on sociocultural perspectives (Vélez-Agosto, Soto-Crespo, Vizcarrondo-Oppenheimer, Vega-Molina & García Coll, 2017). The theory underwent many modifications and the BSP (2005) is a revised version of Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979, 1992, 2001) seminal work on socio-ecological systems theory. In essence, the BSP places an individual at the centre of activities involved in their development and learning. As of 2005, the BSP received some additions to the initial four systems conceptualised in 1977 and the revised five systems in 1979. Bronfenbrenner (2005) added proximal processes in the process-person-context-time (or PPCT model), which are the crucial catalysts for human development. Figure 1 shows five nested bioecological systems from the PPCT model (context and time components).

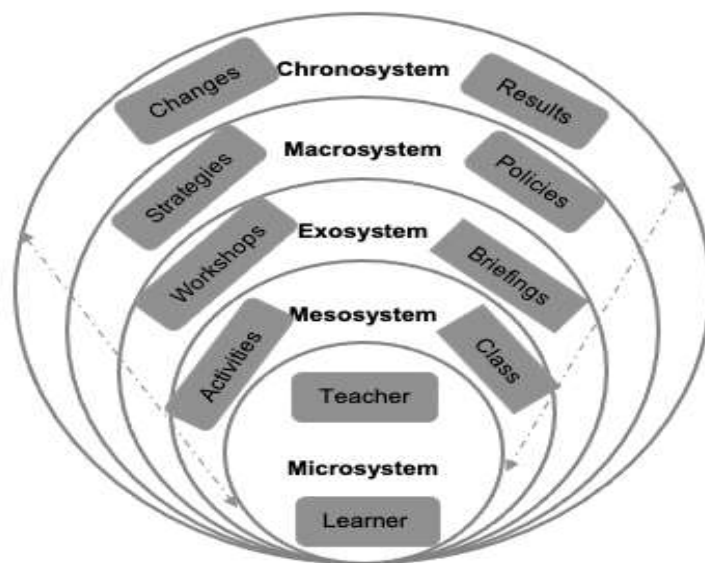


Figure 1 Bronfenbrenner's (2005) nested bioecological systems model

I employed Urie Bronfenbrenner's (2005) BSP by adapting the five nested bioecological systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. In this study the teacher instead of the learner (child), as Bronfenbrenner initially did, was centralised. The BSP was applied to the study since it is concerned with the interactions with the physical environment, thus, aligning with the intentions of inclusive education. The BSP "explicitly situates human development within a particular cultural context in which family, peers and learning settings are regarded as key in responding to" inclusive education (Soni, Lynch, McLinden, Mbukwa-Ngwira, Mankhwazi, Jolley, Virendrakumar, Bedford & Gercama, 2020:8). The mainstream teacher's role in and influence on the implementation of the inclusive education policy were of critical importance in the study since they influence the learner's environment.

Crawford, Snyder and Adelson (2020) observe that researchers employing the BSP pay too much attention to the interaction between a child and the other system factors. However, the BSP has interrelated and nested systems. Thus, the understanding of BSP should be holistic. In some studies BSP was used as a theoretical lens in an attempt to "investigate [...] the role of all of [the systems] to provide data adequate for understanding human development" (Bronfenbrenner, 2005:xv). Much as the understanding would help learners, the teacher may also be a unit of analysis since teachers are critical to the successful implementation of inclusive education policies and strategies (Dorji, Bailey, Paterson, Graham & Miller, 2021; Majoko, 2019). Interaction occurs in the systems, whether involving the learner directly or indirectly; the focus is on the developmental and learning needs of the learner. The teacher would be the conduit between the policy and the learner (Asamoah, Ofori-Dua, Cudjoe, Abdullah & Nyarko, 2018; De Beco, 2018; Zagona, Kurth & MacFarland, 2017).

The interrelated nature of the BSP made the theory a critical underpinning of the study. The BSP, especially the chronosystem, could guide learner development through different stages of education (McLinden, Lynch, Soni, Artiles, Kholowa, Kamchedzera, Mbukwa & Mankhwazi, 2018). The chronosystem could operate across education levels and within one level, serving as a monitoring and evaluation tool. For example, the chronosystem could help monitor and evaluate inclusive practices implemented within mainstream education against what happens over time. In the chronosystem, all the inclusive education stakeholders may be periodically checked (monitored) on how they implement or benefit from inclusive education and finally checked (evaluated) on what they have achieved. For

instance, for secondary education in Malawi, the performance of learners with disabilities in the national examinations could evaluate their strides in mainstream education and the eventual transition to tertiary education. In essence, all five systems would support one another to achieve the intentions of inclusive education and all these interactions are primarily insinuated by the teacher, hence the unit of analysis (De Souza, 2022b).

Some critics believe that this theory is Western and yet to be amenable to African educational conditions. Nonetheless, BSP cannot be entirely dismissed. Swartz (2015) states that the BSP could help maintain and show the numerous interactions between the teachers' environment and how it influences the learners' cognitive development. In this study, the BSP helped theorise the teachers' engagement with inclusive education policies and strategies. It also assisted in understanding how teachers shaped or influenced the effective learning of learners with disabilities. Thus, the BSP can suffice to understand all learners' learning processes over time.

Methodological Framework

Research Orientation

A qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigm using a phenomenological design was employed in this study. The phenomenon investigated was policy-to-practice disparities in inclusive education. The intention was to investigate lived experiences of mainstream secondary teachers in supporting learners with disabilities (see Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018; Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2020; Schratz, 2020; Tracy, 2019). I was interested in interpreting mainstream secondary teachers' interpretations of the inclusive education policy and practice implementation, hence the interpretive paradigm.

Data Generation Methods

Textual data was generated through the use of interviews; a typical feature of a qualitative approach (Aspers & Corte, 2019; DePoy & Gitlin, 2019; Kumar, 2019; Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Opie, 2019). I employed semi-structured interviews because they can provide an in-depth understanding of the teachers' interpretations and insight into and implementation of inclusive education policies and practices. The interviews also offered opportunities to ask follow-up questions and further probe the participants' responses (Ahlin, 2019; Dakwa, 2015; Gudkova, 2018; Mann, 2016; Roulston & Choi, 2018). During the interviews, the participants discussed their thoughts, wishes and fears about implementing inclusive education in mainstream secondary education in Malawi. Thus, the interviews provided a productive space for continued dialogue with the teachers about inclusive secondary education in Malawi. These

interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis, each lasting about 30 minutes. I had a set of guiding questions that I asked each participant. The questions were meant to be the opener of our discussions and to define the scope of the research.

Selection of Research Sites and Participants

With this study I focused on Malawi's South-west Education Division (SWED). Within the SWED, I selected the Lower Shire districts of Chikwawa and Nsanje, focusing on mainstream secondary teachers. Factors such as teaching subjects, gender and teaching loads varied from one secondary school to another. The participants were selected purposefully, whereby those experienced in teaching inclusive classes were approached. In essence, other factors, apart from inclusive teaching, did not play any significant role in the selection of the participants. The sampling procedure was purposive, whereby I got information from the heads of the schools on mainstream classes that included learners with different disabilities. I then approached teachers of such classes and invited them to participate in the research. I interviewed four teachers at each school – 16 in total at the four schools.

Data Analysis

Creswell (2018) recommends a data analysis spiral to avoid complications arising from large amounts of qualitative data. The spiral breaks the task of data analysis into steps. No exclusive steps were followed in this study as the data analysis started at the beginning of the data generation process (see Tracy, 2019). Instead, two tools, the analytical framework and the analytical memo, helped analyse the data thematically following an inductive approach. With these tools I developed categories, themes and evidence from texts and references to the research questions. The direct quotations from the interview transcripts formed a thick data description in the analytical memo.

Ethical Issues

The study was part of a larger student project given ethical clearance (2019-0438-2082) by the Rhodes University Ethical Standards Committee (Human Ethics Sub-committee). Permission to include and access the schools was sought and negotiated with the Education Division Manager and head teachers (principals). Each participant gave their consent to be included and to participate in the study. During the consent negotiations, a letter of invitation to the participants described and explained the objectives with the study and the data generation procedures. Importantly, all the participants were assured anonymity, hence pseudonyms (such as Participant #1) were used in cross-referencing the primary data. Verbal consent was sought before using the audio recorder during interviews. The time (during

breaks) and the venue (within school premises) for the interviews, were also negotiated with the participants.

Research Findings

Problems in Inclusive Education Policy and Practice Implementation

All 16 participants acknowledged that many problems affected the implementation of inclusive education policy and practice in Malawi, such as:

- A lack of in-service training
Participant #1 said: *“Training is needed for teachers like me, so I should use better methods to help learners with disabilities.”* Participant #13 agreed: *“More training to all teachers to impart the necessary knowledge on how to help the learners properly.”* Another participant was of the view that *“[L]earners will successfully achieve curriculum aims if teachers are well trained in all disabilities”* (Participant #9). Thus, all 16 participants in the four selected secondary schools in the Lower Shire of Malawi believed that through in-service training, they would be able to understand and apply inclusive education policies and strategies. In this vein, Participant #3 said: *“My plea goes to the Ministry of Education to help us to know these policies.”* Thus, in-service training has been identified as a strategy towards inclusive education in the four selected secondary schools.
- A lack of resources and inspections
Participant #5 suggested that *“[t]he government must pump in resources, all resources, most of the resources, I mean financially and materially.”* Another participant requested that *“[e]ven physically, they should come in and intensify this programme; otherwise, it is just a word. People are just talking; there is this inclusiveness, but things are not okay on the ground”* (Participant #11). Thus, providing resources and doing inspections has been designated as another strategy that would help the mainstream education system to move towards inclusivity.

Inclusive Education Policy Development

All 16 participants observed that demands for inclusivity emphasised classroom activities. The participants were of the view that extra-curricular activities are as important as classroom teaching and learning activities. The participants suggested that the development of inclusive education policy could expand its foci and include the following:

- Disability-friendly sporting activities
Participant #16 talked about *“[i]ntroducing sporting facilities that will motivate learners who are disabled in some ways.”* Participant #4 shared the following:
From my present experience, when organising sporting activities, most of those who are disabled [...] are omitted. So, I would campaign for the provision of sporting activities or equipment so that those with mental or physical challenges can also get into that.

It is difficult to understand why inclusive education policy in Malawi only emphasises classroom

teaching and learning activities because extracurricular activities can be included. The distinction between the two is not necessary, as both contribute to the overall educational experience.

- Student associations
Participant #8 suggested: *“Another thing I think of creating is maybe I can call a group, a grouping of these students that have problems, organise them like an association of some kind so that they should be able to share their experiences and come up with what they think because they are the ones that are going through such challenges, so are better placed to give suggestions on what best should happen to them.”* Also, *“I would like to say I would create an environment where students with learning disabilities can expose and express their feelings – that way then we can make them the better part of the society”* (Participant #12). Although this suggestion of students forming groups or associations is more of an advocacy initiative than a policy requirement, such initiatives can be supported in the policy rather than stating them as policy mandates.

Inclusive Education Practice Implementation

Some participants felt that school-level training on inclusivity could help transform mainstream education to be inclusive. However, other participants felt that inclusive education was not attainable.

- School-level inclusive education training
Participant #2 said:
I would love if there were some insights organised at a school level maybe so that teachers who are handling such classes should be able to help at that level before it is taken to the specialist [...] so I feel resources and expertise are what are missing much.
- Feasibility of inclusive education
Some mainstream secondary teachers resist the fact that learners with disabilities are included in mainstream classes. One mainstream teacher said: *“I could not accept the disabled learning with the abled ones. After all, they will not be able to compete in the examinations and lag behind all the time because they need special attention”* (Participant #4). Participant #11 protested: *“The government is sending these children with physical disabilities to our schools because they are poor. Had it been that these children were sons and daughters of government ministers, they could not send them here. I feel like the government is wrong in sending the children here. Better they leave them in their initial schools.”* Participant #15 said: *“I do not see a reason to talk about these kind of students. They are just slowing down the learning process.”* Thus, some mainstream teachers were against inclusive education. This resistance may also be influenced by other factors that demonstrate teachers’ practices such as teaching methods and assessment practice, which require further exploration.

Discussion and Recommendations

The study findings reveal that inclusive education in the selected four secondary schools in the Lower

Shire of Malawi faced a mismatch between policy and practice. Still, expectations are for inclusive education to succeed. The success will require efforts from all stakeholders involved in inclusive education through interactions of the educational systems. This argument points to the concept of the interrelatedness of systems in Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) BSP. Systems do not exist independently. Instead, systems are interrelated and form supporting systems for all learners, including those with disabilities (De Souza, 2022b). Teachers’ interpretations of the inclusive education policies and the strategies may inform how they act to achieve inclusivity (Ishida, 2020; Magumise & Sefotho, 2020; Mpu, 2018).

In light of the study findings, there is a need to proffer teacher-framed strategies informed by policies and experiences to mediate the policy directives and the teachers’ practices. In the following sections I discuss how policy-to-practice disparities in inclusive education can be reduced and inclusivity enhanced.

Addressing the Problems in Inclusive Education

Based on the findings of this study, one of the critical teacher-framed strategies to mitigate policy-to-practice disparities and enhance inclusive education is to address existing problems. This strategy could involve the following:

- Continuous professional development
All 16 participants observed that much of the current in-service training on inclusive education focuses on specialist teachers. Through continuous professional development, mainstream teachers should receive repeated training on inclusive teaching practices. Through teacher professional development programmes, mainstream teachers will also have opportunities to contribute to inclusive education policy formulation in an exosystem context, thus facilitating the nested nature of bioecological interactions necessary for inclusive education systems (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).
- Adequate resources
Adequate teaching and learning resources, materials and aids should be channelled to mainstream secondary schools. Some schools were initially meant to cater for learners without disabilities. With the inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream education, the resources, materials and aids that the learners used in the special schools should now be available in mainstream schools. This strategy informs the transformative systems needed to succeed in the government’s political response to inclusive education (Banks et al., 2022; De Souza, 2020). Channelling the necessary resources to mainstream schools will help teachers to support learners with disabilities and to follow policy directives for promoting education in inclusive settings.
- Transforming special schools and specialist teachers
The number of specialist teachers in mainstream secondary schools should be increased by recruiting more teachers or transforming special schools into mainstream schools. The specialist teachers in

special schools should be deployed to mainstream schools to assist mainstream teachers. The special schools may transform just like the mainstream schools are transforming in the context of inclusive education.

Using a Theory-based Policy Formulation Approach
A theory-based policy formulation approach entails recognising different systems that come into play in inclusive education. From a microsystem theoretical perspective, one of the situations that have led to a mismatch between policy and practice in inclusive education is the tensions between policy ideals and context realities for teachers. The expectation of the microsystem (where learners, teachers and parents are situated) is that the macrosystem (where policies and legislative texts originate) would consider inclusive needs that would help to enhance inclusive education and promote inclusive societies (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Instead, the macrosystem (the government and policymakers) is dormant, leaving mainstream teachers who are the frontrunners voiceless, as was found in the four selected secondary schools in the Lower Shire of Malawi.

Arguably, the formulation of the current national education policy is not approached from a systems perspective (see Kamchedzera, 2010). For example, the exosystem offers an excellent platform for policymakers to meet teachers before and after the classes in the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Thus, the interaction of teachers and policymakers in the exosystem should not initially be about orientating them to new policies but instead soliciting ideas for policy formulation. From a BSP standpoint, the policy-to-practice disparity comes about because the national inclusive education policies tend to copy international protocols at the expense of systems within Malawi. The mesosystem and the exosystem could inform policy formulation at a national level.

Instead of Malawi's inclusive education (as a whole BSP) looking to its systems, such as the exosystem, for insights into policy formulation, it imitates stipulations outside the BSP, which do little to enhance inclusive education (De Souza, 2020). Therefore, future national inclusive education policy formulation should embrace the BSP or any other theoretical perspective that departs from a systems perspective. The systems perspective will help policymakers formulate inclusive education policies that consider the realities of inclusive schooling (Smit, Preston & Hay, 2020).

Engaging Evidence-based Practice Implementation Approach

An evidence-based practice implementation approach would require policy custodians to deliver inclusive education policies in light of good

practices and contradictions in inclusive schooling. The evidence-based approach to the implementation of inclusive education practice would call for policymakers to rethink the practicalities of mainstream education and assign explicit roles to mainstream teachers (Majoko, 2019). This rethinking involves the resonance of the mesosystem (policy implementation) with the macrosystem (policy formulation) of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) BSP. It also involves the political influences that the macrosystem has on the mesosystem and the microsystem (De Souza, 2020). The thrust is that the influence of the macrosystem on either the microsystem or the mesosystem should be less political (ideologically framed) and more evidence-based (grounded in educational realities).

The development of inclusive education depends on sound government policies and strategies (Slee, 2013). This situation is even more true regarding the teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education. The attitudes of mainstream teachers before learners with disabilities enter their classroom should be just as important as how mainstream teachers provide for the needs of learners with disabilities during the learning process. In essence, a holistic approach is needed for the implementation of inclusive education to achieve parity between policy and practice. The environment for policy interpretation and understanding could equally be an essential aspect in the successful implementation of inclusive education. Seemingly, a viable solution rests in the mainstream teachers' practices yet are overshadowed by policy disjuncture and the cascading of knowledge and practices stipulated in the policy (Hajisoteriou & Sorkos, 2023). The policies should adopt sound and evidence-based school practices and incorporate them into their stipulations during revision and reformulation processes (Choi, McCart & Sailor, 2020). In doing so, the policy-practice mismatches may be mitigated and inclusive education enhanced.

Conclusion

In this study I found that inclusive education is failing at the point of delivery due to poorly formulated policies breaking down because front-line practitioners are ill-prepared and poorly supported. The study shows the inherent conflict between using a consultative-systems approach and implementing remotely-formulated and top-down policy roll-out. The study also exposed important questions about how hierarchical systems can be influenced to adopt a genuinely consultative, two-way vertical policy-practice dialogue that may lead to radical policy alterations unforeseen (and unwelcomed) by policymakers. Such potential conflicts apply to the interface between school-level and governmental sub-systems and are

significant within school and community sub-systems. Using insights from 16 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with mainstream secondary teachers in the Lower Shire districts of Chikwawa and Nsanje in Malawi, I discussed solutions to the policy-to-practice disparities in inclusive education, including training initiatives and emphasis on the value of Urie Bronfenbrenner's (2005) BSP as a way to improve implementation. The solutions discussed in this study could form the basis of fruitful discussions about the viability of applying the bioecological systems approach in the formulation of policy and implementation of practice in inclusive primary and secondary education in southern Africa.

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